

What Have They Done Since Proust?

THE FRENCH NOVEL OF TO-DAY

V—The Untranslatable Word

By
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It is a hopeless job trying to define a word for which there is no equivalent in one's own language. It is far more difficult for example than translating slang, for which there is generally at least an analogy. "Er lügte das Blaue vom Himmel hinunter" goes quite well into "He lied like a trooper." Even puns can sometimes be rendered, because they exist in most languages. It is a poor Jew who cannot make a pun in English, French, German or American.

But at the risk of being a bore I must try to convey something of the meaning of the word "ambiance," because it is the only expression which sums up what all the best French writers have in common, even when in other respects they differ as much as Meredith differed from Dickens.

"Ambiance" is a qualitative definition.

It is applicable to a writer from the points of view of subject, form and especially style.

A murder for example is a murder. But crimes could be classified from this point of view. Merely commonplace murders would possess little ambiance. Murders such as those committed by the Düsseldorf maniac (as MacOrlan realised, are simply brimming with it. The amount of space given to a murder by a newspaper is a fairly sound criterion from this point of view.

In "L'Homme Traqué" there is little to be got out of the fact that a baker kills an old woman. The reader's emotions are involved only by the subsequent events; by the effect on the writer of such a situation, whether taken from police reports or imagined by him. In order to invest the facts with a flavour which appeals to our imaginations, his imagination must have got to work on them.

Julian Green's terrible "Leviathan" is a superb instance of slow, progressive horror in a narrow but intense setting. From start to finish it has ambiance. "Les Enfants Terribles," written in three weeks under the influence of opium, is packed with it.

But then, you will say, ambiance is atmosphere. It is not. Atmosphere is an indispensable ingredient of this quality. But there is more to it than that. In order to achieve it there must be contrast. The contrast may be violent but may not be exaggerated. It must convince. If the writer, having duly created his atmosphere, makes his point clumsily, as Hardy for example does in the hanging scene in "Jude the Obscure," if his contrasts are crude or melodramatic, they do not achieve ambiance.

This quality is certainly a "plus" one: plus a little something that some others haven't got. It is what very few English writers have got, and that is why its importance in modern French literature must be stressed. "Antic

Hay" possibly has it; "Point Counterpoint" and "Brave New World" certainly have not. An excellent example of it is Osbert Sitwell's "Before the Bombardment"; Hemingway has it in plenty.

I imagine atmosphere as a static condition created by the writer. In novels it is rather like the weather in real life. It is there; one is conscious of it, sometimes keenly so, but it does not move, although it may change.

Ambiance, which certainly implies movement, is applicable to painting as well as to literature. We use the word movement to describe a certain quality additional to atmosphere which we have learnt to expect from the best pictures.

In style this quality manifests itself most definitely. I cannot imagine it associated in a high degree with "best-sellers," although Edgar Wallace, in his early African stories and in "The Four Just Men," quite often came near to revealing it.

One of the great advantages the French novelist possesses over his English colleagues is his freedom to write short novels. He is not constrained to produce his minimal

seventy thousand words for old ladies who want a good seven-and-sixpennyworth, who buy their books for quantity rather than quality. Where the unfortunate English writer is for ever obliged to throw in an adjective or two, a chapter or two, to make weight, the Frenchman can cut and tighten and concentrate. The former makes fortunes, the latter literature. MacOrlan's study in diabolism, "Le

Nègre Leonard et Maître Jean Mullin," must be one of the shortest novels on record, but it is a novel nevertheless, and not a short story. Like a symphony, it is divided into three movements, crammed with harmony, counterpoint and rhythm.

Ambiance is not however incompatible with romanticism. On the contrary, one of the works which possesses it most definitely is the most romantic in modern French literature, a work which stands entirely by itself because its author, alas, died before he could give it a successor. I refer to "Le Grand Meaulnes," by Alain-Fournier. The only writer with whom I can compare Alain-Fournier is Hans Andersen; the only story in the same class as "Le Grand Meaulnes" is the "Snow-Queen."

I have just realised that I can, after all, explain to you perfectly the quality of this untranslatable word. While I have been fumbling around for definitions, trying to recall novels to refer to by way of illustration, one name was gradually forcing its way to the forefront of my mind. That name was Emily Brontë.

I doubt whether there is in all literature a novel which possesses more completely the quality of ambiance than "Wuthering Heights."

Previous Articles in this series:

1. THE GENIUS OF JULES ROMAIN.
2. JEAN GIRAUDOUX.
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THE LOVELY LADY. By D. H. Lawrence. 7s. 6d. (Secker.)

The first six stories in this volume tone together in the reader's retrospect. The last two remain somewhat isolated, possibly because they are more intense, though what they convey is rather a mood of deep, musing half-fantasy. But all the time, in all the stories, one is aware of a strength of impulse which was peculiar to this writer among his contemporaries and at the same time a link between him and the great English writers of the past.

Or perhaps the real split is the change over from presentation of people whom one feels one might meet in Arnold Bennett to a kind of characterisation that may alienate many readers; for why should a normal girl break into a chant, or the thoughts of a woman sitting talking in a room embody themselves in rhythms like the psalms? They do, however, in the richly beautiful tale, "The Overtone,"

and the success of the method should not be doubted for a moment. This is one of the finest stories in the language. "The Man who Loved Islands" is haunting in another way; the first six stories are brisk, humorous, and immune from the pretentious or false; and satisfying as so little writing is satisfying at the present day. When will prose of this quality be written again? ARTHUR BALL.

THE HISTORY OF THE VESTAL VIRGINS OF ROME. By Sir T. Cato Worsfold, Bart. 10s. 6d. (Rider.)

The author has collected in this book a considerable amount of information on all aspects of the famous and little known order of ancient Rome, from the time when the Vestals were founded in 715 B.C. to their final extinction under Theodosius in A.D. 394. The book is well and fully illustrated,

The Bookshelf

OLD DIARIES

Woodforde Papers and Diaries.

Edited, with an Introduction, by Dorothy Heighes Woodforde. 10s. 6d. (Peter Davies.)

The Woodforde family is already very pleasantly known to readers by the "Diary of a Country Parson." But it now appears that the author of those delectable jottings

was only following a family habit in keeping a journal. The earliest to do so was one Robert Woodforde (1606-54); quite how many of those who followed after did the like is uncertain because, by a deplorable error in 1902, when Alexander Woodforde, a great collector of family documents and legends, died, some of his collection was sold by mistake as waste-paper. The editor of the present volume, Miss Dorothy Woodforde, begins with the diary kept during the years 1684-90 by Mary, wife of the Rev. Samuel Woodforde. There is perhaps not much for the connoisseur in her brief and pious entries, but it is impossible not to like a woman who, when her maid marries, writes in her private journal her earnest hope that God will help the couple to live in love all their days. The most curious and exciting matter has to do with Samuel

Woodforde's great-granddaughter Nancy, who kept house for that uncle of hers who is already known to us as the Country Parson. Nancy's niece, Julia, had the one great romantic adventure in the annals of the family. When a young girl she persuaded her father to allow her to accompany him, dressed in the uniform of a lieutenant, on a visit to the Trappist monastery at Lulworth, where no woman was allowed to enter. While there she was attracted by the good looks of one of the young monks, one James Power. She met the young monk again, apparently by chance, this time when wandering on the seashore. He confided to her his hatred of the life in the monastery, and his longing to escape and turn Protestant. Colonel Woodforde consented to assist the young man to escape by sea, disguised as a sailor. Julia and the ex-monk evidently fall in love with each other, but the girl's father would not sanction any engagement. He used what influence he had to secure the young man a post so that he might earn a livelihood, and the fact that he sought to find him a post in one of the colonies looks as though he preferred to keep him away from his family. It was Zachary

Macaulay (Macaulay's father) who gave him a job in Sierra Leone. Power's letters to the Woodforde family give vivid accounts of his adventurous journey out, and of his life in the fever-ridden colony. Julia's entries in her diary at this period are short and pathetic:

"February 16.—My Dear Friend has been gone from England 1 Year and five Months. I pray God that he is well and going on prosperously.

"March 17.—Mama and I dined at Mrs. Jean's. My Dearest Friend has been absent from England a Year and a Half. I pray God he is well and happy."

Having been dangerously ill with fever, he was advised to return to England. His "Diary of Voyage on the *Brig Success*" gives a detailed account of his stock of food for his personal use on the voyage: "3 Sheep, 3 Goats, 2 Pigs, 6 dozen of fowl and 2 dozen of Muscovy Ducks..." Julia's father does not appear to have been too well pleased by the return of his protégé, and forbids any engagement between the young people, although Power says in a letter to her that he has "many lucrative situations in view and can embrace which I please." He returns to "that fatal Colony" certain

that he will never return. He again succumbs to the fever, is put on board a ship bound for England, but dies at sea.

The other diaries yield a sufficiency of such matter as will be expected—entries unconsciously throwing a sharp light on social conditions in rural England in the eighteenth century, oddities of local character, and gossip that sometimes have a queer savour after all these generations.

STRANGERS AND SOJOURNERS AT PORT ROYAL. By Ruth Clark. 18s. (Cambridge University Press.)

The objectionable practice of issuing works of academic research as if they were works in general literature has become far too common, and invites rebuke. The work under notice, though it will doubtless save some time and trouble to whoever hereafter undertakes a very comprehensive history of Port Royal, is not a book at all; it is an industrious compilation in which names crop up in the order that they occur in documents for which Miss



Ludovic Stuart D'Aubigny.

From "Strangers and Sojourners at Port Royal," by Ruth Clark (Cambridge University Press).